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## A STUDY OF THE WHOLE BIBLE

### THE BOOK OF NUMBERS

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#### A FINAL TEST OF FAITHFULNESS (22:1–25:18)

##### The Place of the Passage

This is the final episode of the exodus generation, as the new generation emerges into leadership in the next section (Numbers 26:1–65). In this concluding episode of the exodus generation, Moab (one of the remaining nations east of the Jordan) tries to destroy Israel. Moab's first attempt is to hire a seer, Balaam, to curse Israel. However, God turns Balaam's curses into blessings for his people (22:1–24:25). Moab tries a second time, this time tempting Israel directly with adulterous worship of Baal. This is Israel's first encounter with this Canaanite deity, and tragically the Israelites quickly surrender to the allure of Baal worship (25:1–18). No pair of events captures the stunning goodness of God, on the one hand, and the equally stunning faithlessness of the exodus generation, on the other, as vividly as these capstone events from that generation.

##### The Big Picture

God's people enjoy his unconditional love yet are easily distracted by the temptations of idolatry.

##### Gospel Glimpses

**UNCONDITIONAL LOVE.** Remarkably, throughout the Balaam narrative there is no indication that Israel knows what is happening. The account seems to indicate that Balak hires Balaam and engages in repeated efforts to curse Israel but that Israel knows nothing about it. Israel learns about Balaam's efforts after the fact, but God's love is at work even when Israel is oblivious to their danger. And then Israel, blind to God's goodness, turns away from him to follow Baal. Nevertheless, God is still quick to forgive and continue his covenant<sup>2</sup> purposes in Israel. The unconditional, undeserved, unending love of God is beautifully displayed in these events.

##### Whole Bible Connections

**BAAL.** Of 67 appearances in Bible, this is the first time Baal is mentioned. The lust of the people after this false god and their quickness to abandon Yahweh, as described in this first encounter with Baal, is an archetype for Israel's subsequent temptations to serve Baal—and of God's remarkable patience to forgive and restore Israel.

**BALAAM'S GREED.** Some scholars believe that Balaam was a distant relative of Israel. Numbers 22:5 notes that Balaam came from "Pethor, which is near the [Euphrates] River in the land of the people of Amaw." The Hebrew "Amaw" could be translated "his people." Thus this verse might mean that Balaam was from "the

land of the sons of his people.” Balaam could be a descendant of Abraham’s kin from that region, the household of Bethuel and Laban (Genesis 24:1–61). Perhaps Balak recruited Balaam, rather than using a shaman of his own religion, because Balaam knew the same God that Israel served. Whatever Balaam’s background, it is clear that he knew Yahweh but was willing to abandon faithfulness for the sake of gain. This willingness to apostatize for the sake of wealth becomes known in the Bible as “the way of Balaam, the son of Beor, who loved gain from wrongdoing”.

### **Theological Soundings**

**THE PROMISED KING.** Balaam prophesied before Israel set foot in the land, yet he anticipated the rise of an Israelite dynasty to rule the whole land (Numbers 24:17). This probably refers to the rise of King David, who completed Israel’s conquest of the land. Some believe the reference is more precisely to Jesus, the Son of David. The mention of a star to mark this promised king has often been compared to the star of Bethlehem (Matthew 2:2). While the latter interpretation is attractive, the reference is most likely to the rise of the Davidic dynasty generally. The Pentateuch reveals a prominent interest in the tribe of Judah and the Davidic dynasty, which, of course, is the line from which the Messiah was to appear.

### **Glossary of Terms**

**APOSTACY.** Abandonment or renunciation of professed faith.

**COVENANT.** A binding agreement between two parties, typically involving a formal statement of their relationship, a list of stipulations and obligations for both parties, a list of witnesses to the agreement, and a list of curses for unfaithfulness and blessings for faithfulness to the agreement. The OT is more properly understood as the old covenant, meaning the agreement established between God and his people prior to the coming of Jesus Christ and the establishment of the new covenant (the NT).

**ORACLE.** From Latin “to speak.” In the Bible, refers to a divine pronouncement delivered through a human agent.

**Please answer the following questions:**

**Numbers Chapter 22**

1. Of what nation was Balak king? (4)
2. What did Balak want Balaam to do? (5–6)
3. What did God tell Balaam not to do? (12)
4. How was Balak's second approach to Balaam different from the first? (15–17)
5. What did Balaam do that showed he was wavering? (18–19)
6. When Balaam went with the princes of Moab what stood in his path? (22–24)
7. What did the donkey do when it saw the angel the first time? (23)
8. What did the donkey do when it saw the angel further on ahead? (25–30)
9. What did the angel of the Lord tell Balaam to do? (35)
10. Where did Balak take Balaam? (41)

### Numbers Chapter 23

1. How did Balaam wish to die? (10)
2. Why was Balak frustrated? (11–12)
3. On what mountain did they build seven altars the second time? (13–14)  
And the third time? (28–29)
4. In what ways is God not like a man? (19–20)
5. To what two animals did Balaam liken Israel? (21–24)

### Numbers Chapter 24

1. Balaam prophesied that Israel's king would be greater than which king? (7)
2. Balaam yearns for the wealth Balak offers but is unable to do what is required to receive it. Whom did both Balak and Balaam blame for the failure of their collaborative effort? (10–13)
3. What was all that Balaam said he would say to Balak? (12–13)
4. Balaam finally announces a curse— against Israel's enemies! Moab's plan to curse Israel backfires. How does this turn of events demonstrate God's promise to Abraham in Genesis 12:2–3? (14–25)

5. What six nations would be conquered or destroyed? (15–25)
6. Balaam's final oracle anticipates the fall of Israel's enemies (such as Moab, Edom, and Amalek), the future rise of the Assyrian Empire (Asshur; v. 22), and the eventual fall of the Assyrians before invaders from Kittim (Greece; v. 24). But the highlight of this final oracle is the vision in verse 17: who or what is promised in this verse?

### **Numbers Chapter 25**

1. Of what were many of the Israelite men guilty? (1)
2. Having failed to remove God's blessing from Israel, Moab and the Midianite elders try a different approach. They seek to allure Israel to abandon God's blessing. Sadly, the people are quick to join the Moabite fertility cult, yoking themselves to Baal (v. 3). Israel's chiefs begin to marry the daughters of Moabite and Midianite chiefs. What does the adulterous character of Israel's first sin with Baal indicate about the nature of all idolatry, in God's eyes?
3. What was to be done to those who worshipped Baal of Peor? (4–5)
4. What did Phinehas do to the Israelite man and Midianite woman? (6–8, 11–15)
5. All of Israel's chiefs deserve to perish, and a plague breaks out against all Israel (4–5, 8–9). But God stops the plague when the people repent (v. 6), and a judge in Israel brings justice against one representative ringleader (vv. 5, 11). How does this illustrate God's eagerness to atone for his people when they repent (v. 13), contrasted with the full justice visited upon those outside his covenant (17–18)?